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# THE FRENCH NAVY.

BY M. GEORGES CLEMENCEAU.

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AT this epoch, when the whole world is in a fever and arming to the utmost, public opinion has good reason to heed the points gained by all those nations which are of some account as military powers, and which, within twenty-four hours, may find themselves in a struggle.

The European powers to be considered in connection with this particular subject are six in number: England, Germany, Austria, Italy, France, and Russia. Leaving aside the various land forces, the value of which is about equal, I will treat especially of the sea forces which have more particularly occupied the attention of public writers during recent years.

What do we find at the time of my writing? On one side, Germany, Austria, and Italy, grouped in a geographical unit, cemented by the triple alliance. On the other side, France and Russia, which, while far removed from each other, seem to be bound to act together. Lastly, isolated from all, but free in every motion, England appears to us as the arbiter of all contests, ready as she is to cause the scales to deflect on the side to which she will bring the strength of her fleet, of her manufacturing resources, and of her credit.

France is placed in a rather peculiar position. On the continent she must concentrate her defensive forces against the steady danger from Germany, without, however, neglecting Italy, which is to be feared above all from the sea. Besides, on account of the position of her coast, she finds herself, so to speak, within range of England's guns, and therefore obliged to anticipate the interference of this last power, under the penalty of falling at any moment into a position almost desperate if attacked by all.

The French navy may play a more important part in the next war than many people are willing to imagine. At the outset, the French fleet appears in the Mediterranean as the right flank of the French army, this latter presenting a front, from the Vosges to the Maritime Alps, against an Italo-German invasion. It represents meanwhile, in the North Sea and the Baltic, the left flank of that immense strategic deploy, which, overflowing the continents, extends the battlefields beyond the coasts.

But the mere conception of such an extension of the French naval forces necessarily implies an English neutrality. If this neutrality should fail—if, as she did a century ago, England should join the continental coalition—France would find herself suddenly thrown into such peril that there would appear to be no hope of her ultimate success.

The armies of the French Revolution vanquished the strongest armies of monarchical Europe. Napoleon pursuing and outdoing the military achievements of the Republic seemed to have crushed the last resistance of the allied sovereigns. Yet even he was finally forced to resign the struggle in the face of England.

"In spite of all appearances, it is not in Moscow ablaze that Napoleon's luck disappeared; it was engulfed in the waters of Trafalgar. In vain victories followed victories. All the triumphs on land will not save him. The hero is wounded to death, although the wound is a hidden one. . . . England's vessels have vanquished at Waterloo. There would never have been a Blücher had there not been a Nelson."\*

France has thus a pre-eminent interest in making sure of English neutrality in case of a contest with the Triple Alliance. Is she capable of forcing this neutrality on her enemy of centuries? That is a question which, as the case stands, it is difficult to answer. It is, however, the primary condition of success, and if it is lacking, no amount of bravery can make up for the deficiency in our means of defence. Friends or foes may admire the heroic deeds of our brave marines, just as King William did at Sedan; but the issue of the contest will nevertheless be settled beforehand. The question is not how the French will fight; but what will be their chances of victory, within the limits of human foresight.

Now what a temptation for England—always so eager to guard her own interests—to take advantage of the opportu-

\*Admiral Réveillère: Preface to "*Les Guerres Navales de Demain*," by the Commandant Z. and H. Montéchant.

nity, when Europe will be annihilating herself with her own hands, to interfere without any risk in the contest and seize the greatest profits. To refuse to recognize this eventuality, as French strategists have systematically been doing until now, is pure folly, the more inexplicable from the fact that England could not allow us to beat Italy on the sea, without by the same blow losing her most powerful means of action against us in the Mediterranean Sea.

Under those conditions, while we have the utmost interest in avoiding at this very moment a conflict between France and England, how is it possible for us to divert the chance of British intervention if not by threatening our neighbors with a warfare of cruise and privateering, which would be so disastrous to them, instead of stupidly offering, as we do, the antiquated contest by squadron in which they have every reason to feel assured of victory. We have, in fact, sacrificed to the pompous conception of the squadron contest, and to its foremost implement, the iron-clad, the defense of our harbors and coasts, and our surest means of offensive action, the privateering or mercantile war, of which the case of the "Alabama" alone is sufficient to recall the dreadful results. Without a rational organization of our seaboard by means of a fleet of cruisers supported by a strongly protected and provided base-line, we cannot by any means check England. To elude the difficulty, our Admiralty has found nothing better than to refuse to consider the hypothesis of a war with Great Britain, which is designedly discarded from its plans. I admit that its task is thus rendered much easier, though at the same time it is to be regretted that it entirely fails in its duty toward the country.

Thus rid of all cares on the side of their most dangerous adversaries, our admirals have limited themselves to preparation for a squadron fight with the Triple Alliance, as is proved by the resolutions of the "Grand Council of the Navy," inserted in the report by Mons. Pelletan of the Ways and Means Committee for 1896. These resolutions, the importance of which does not seem to have impressed either the government or the Houses, read as follows:

"The Grand Council of the navy, regretting the impossibility, on account of material difficulties in the work, of building a number of iron-clads equal to that commanded by the Triple Alliance, has fixed twenty-

four as the number of battleships of this kind which shall be in readiness in 1904."

Nothing more clear. The admission is even so plain that to risk it there must have been complete confidence in the want of information of our representatives. We shall see where the judgment of our Admiralty leads us when we make a comparison between the French navy and those of our rivals.

We already know enough to perceive how wrong are the tendencies of the French navy, and how they might, if left to persevere in that direction, bring us to disaster, which can still be averted by an average amount of prudence. The motive of such a monstrous error is plainly the lack of rational leading ideas and neglect of the scientific principles and methods set forth some fifty years ago by a parliamentary inquiry, practically forgotten, which it appears to me the time has now arrived to recall.

The evil from which the French navy is suffering dates from far in the past, as the wars of the Revolution and the Empire, notwithstanding a few glorious encounters,\* bear testimony.

The National Assembly of 1848, in sympathy with a movement of renovation which stirred all minds and disposed them towards the immense task of general reconstruction, brought its attention to bear upon the navy. After an exceedingly hot debate, at the termination of which Mons. de Tracy, Secretary of the Navy, tendered his resignation, the Assembly decided "that an inquiry should be instituted regarding the organization and workings of all the departments of the navy." (Law of October 31 1849.) The committee appointed during public sittings held on the 7th, 8th and 9th of November, 1849, was composed of the following members: MM. Collas, Daru, Admiral Hernoux, Admiral Charner, Jules de Lasteyrie, Benoît d'Azy, Dufaure, Lanjuinais, Admiral Lainé, Fournier, Lacrosse, Dahirel, Ch. Dupin, de Montebello and Maissiat.

Mons. Dufaure was elected chairman. From November 12, 1849, the date of its first meeting, until November 19, 1851, the committee held altogether two hundred and three sittings, either in Paris or in the seaports, and took down eighty-nine depositions from officers and functionaries of all grades.

\* An officious writer has contended that the inferiority of the French navy at that epoch of our history was mostly caused by the emigration which had taken away its best officers. The plea is preposterous, for the same remark applies equally as well to the army, which, as every one knows, distinguished itself by incomparable victories.

It must be borne in mind that the committee deemed it advisable not to limit its control to the workings of the naval service, but that its province should be, as well, to lay down the principles and to point out the necessary policy of the French maritime power. Consequently, it decided that, once the inquiry concluded, it would open the general report with a preamble in which there should be resolved the following question: "Why does France require any ships?"

The debate on this fundamental question began on the 24th of January, 1831, following the conclusion of the taking of the evidence, and on the eve of the commitment of the general report which Chairman Dufaure had agreed to write.

Considering the contingencies of war, Admiral Hernoux, a committeeman, stated that, both on the ocean and in the Indian and Chinese seas, all that the French navy could do was "to ruin English commerce, and to accomplish this, the only requirements were swift ships and coaling stations."

As for the European seas, Admiral Hernoux declared with great force against the squadron contest.

"In the inner seas of Europe, would a squadron encounter be possible? The progress of artillery would render them quite different from what they were in the past. In 1794, the Count of Toulouse, after four days' cannonading, was able to retire from the fight with a few men killed and a few ships damaged in their riggings, and yet this battle was not without importance in the eye of combined European powers. In our days, however, two squadrons, equally well equipped and commanded, would in all probability present nothing but wreck and ruin at the termination of a serious encounter.\*

"The two belligerent powers would be in command of the same proportion of strength as before the battle, save for the fact that they would each be a squadron short, and France could not replace hers as easily as England. She must, therefore, on principle abandon the squadron contest, and only accept a regular battle when it is forced upon her, in which predicament she will often find herself, if the great factor of speed is not on her side."

Admiral Lainé contends that the aim of a navy is "to co-operate in the protection of the national territory through the defence of the sea-coast." Like Admiral Hernoux, he insists on the advantages of superior speed.

\* How strong this remark actually is in view of the increasing intricacy of the modern war vessel, the manifest progress of artillery, the appearance of the torpedo on the scene of war, and the replacing of the antiquated gun-powder by the most modern explosives!

The advantages of speed are set forth by Commandant Maisiat in a most forcible manner. He says:

"It would be perfection itself to combine great power with great speed and a broad field of action; but we cannot secure at once these three elements, each of which calls for so great a weight and incumbrance when brought to its maximum, that, to unite them on board the same ship is impracticable."

It therefore devolves upon us to make a selection, and give to our ships either extreme power or extreme speed. Commandant Maissiat does not hesitate to give preference to extreme speed, and the reasons which he cites cannot be gainsaid.

"With a maximum of speed it is possible to defy the threats of a very powerful man-of-war by avoiding an engagement, and carrying the attack elsewhere; while at best there is always the alternative to shirk an unequal battle and spare the forces of the country until less disadvantageous circumstances arise.

"Strength is thus only a means of victory in the face of an adversary powerfully equipped, and is of no avail whatever against a fleetier enemy.

"Speed is a means of leaving a port, even while in the midst of strong foes; it is a means of a *coup de main*, and finally a means of self-preservation. Therefore it is the most natural means of a sudden attack against an adversary who possesses greater power, but is vulnerable in more points. Therefore, it is the natural, the indispensable, weapon of that nation which, though the weaker and less rich upon the seas, is yet the most fearless by national character, and is thus by all means the genuine weapon of France."\*

Admiral Charner also shares the opinion so strongly supported by Commandant Maissiat. He adds:

"France cannot endeavor to put to sea as many vessels as England—a power which should always be taken into consideration when speaking of a maritime war. The defence of our colonies in the event of such a war becomes impossible. Our ships, therefore, require not so much the capacity to carry large quantities of provisions on long cruises, as a great speed. It is by this means alone that, avoiding battles when their lesser strength will put them at a disadvantage, they will attack the adversary at a given point under more opportune circumstances."

Admiral Charner concludes by summing up his remarks in these words: "I persist in thinking that speed is the most important element of a naval force."

Among the officers called upon to testify by the committee was the illustrious Admiral Baudin, from whose deposition I quote the following:

"The protection of our coasts appears to me the most important and material point. It must lead all others. We must commence by protecting

\* Minutes of the sitting of February 1, 1851.

the maritime interests of our coasts, by rendering it impossible for the foe to burn the ports, or to abuse or injure the citizens who dwell upon our shores. This need of coast protection is the first and most indispensable of all.

"Undoubtedly the next maritime war will differ entirely from those of the past, the use of steam as a power not only working a radical change in the manner of carrying on hostilities, but in the aim of the war as well.

"Undoubtedly, should our antagonist in the next war be England, situated as she is, so conveniently opposite our seaports, and having at her command a momentous steam power, easily transportable, and capable of surmounting difficulties to which the old sail-craft, at the mercy of the wind, the calm, and the tide, were obliged to submit, England would from the outset adopt a system of aggression that would be fatal to us.

"In the actual state of our coasts, they stand almost defenceless. I know they are considering the fortification of Havre. I have studied the question myself. I have carefully gone over the plan of the seven attacks directed against that city by way of the sea since the time of Louis XIV. to the time of Napoleon. None of these attacks had any decisive result, merely because they had at their command neither steam nor the powerful means of action now at the disposal of naval artillery. Besides, Havre is only one point of the seaboard, and everywhere the English could burn our maritime cities, if we do not secure a very strong plan of defence.

"So I believe that the need of protecting the coasts is paramount.

"Necessarily the protection of our coasts demands both standing and movable defences, the latter of which have still to be built.

"In France everything is done in so conservative a manner, that we can not be in too much haste to commence and build a powerful navy, propelled by steam, which, when our coasts are attacked, will repair rapidly from one point to another, and shelter them from the incursions of the enemy."

To sum up, the parliamentary inquiry stated as principles the three leading ideas:

1st. It is against the most redoubtable foe on sea that the French Admiralty has the duty of preparing for a struggle.

2d. The first necessary step to be taken is to assure movable defence for the harbors and coasts.

3d. The dominating quality of the French fleet must be a maximum of speed.

Mons. Dufaure, the Chairman, had almost completed his report when the *coup de état* of December 2, 1851, took place, as well as the breaking up of the National Assembly. Naval reforms were then out of the question. We had started on the road to Sedan.

The first earnest attempt at reorganization, as we have seen, did not result in anything definite during the eighteen years that the Empire lasted. We were never entangled in a serious naval war. Our fleet took part in the Crimean war and in a few Colo-



nial expeditions. In the Baltic the Russian fleet did not leave the harbors ; at Sebastopol it sank its own vessels to obstruct the channels. We proceeded in this way as late as the Franco-German war, which also did not present any real naval battle, although we might cite the insignificant encounter of the German dispatch-boat, "Meteor," with the French boat, "Le Bouvet," in the waters of Havana. After running foul of each other once they were so damaged that they re-entered port, and remained side by side until peace was declared.

Another naval feat more worthy of relation is the following. In December, 1870, our fleet, master of the high seas, unchallenged by the little Prussian squadron, was, nevertheless, completely powerless. Until Sedan, our ships cruised in the North Sea and in the Baltic, without attempting any attack on the harbors of the adversary.\* In return we had the vexation of seeing the light packet sloop-of-war "Augusta," fitted out as a privateer, shoot out of Wilhemshafen under the guns of our vessels, cross without inconvenience the Straits of Dover and the English Channel, sail into the Bay of Biscay and establish itself at the mouth of the Gironde, where it captured successively two merchant-men, the "St. Marc," and the "Pierre-Adolphe." It even entered the river, with the idea, undoubtedly, of putting Bordeaux under ransom, but the formidable aspect of Fort "Pâté"† made the Captain reconsider the advisability of such a course, and it turned back.

Then the commander of the "Augusta" sailed up to the anchorage of the Isle "d'Aix," opposite the harbor of Rochefort, occupied for a few hours Fort Boyard, at that time without a garrison, and carried off from the roadstead a small tug belonging to the state. Then lacking coal, he repaired to Vigo, whence our consular agent reported its presence. Two of our warships were ordered there, and anchored at last in the Spanish harbor next to the "Augusta," and remained in this position until the end of the war.

What would have happened if the Captain of the "Augusta" had been still more daring ? What if he had been akin to the

\*On account of the approach to the coast of Germany, and the long distance between her war harbors and commercial ports and the open sea, we may safely contend that the ironclads of our squadron with their deep draught, were entirely unfit for service on the seas where they should have fought. Has this condition of things been altered after twenty-five years ?

†At that time Fort Pâté had not a serviceable gun, nor any garrison whatever,

blockade runners of the Secession War? What if he had procured his supplies out at sea? What if he had had followers, and Prussia had granted letters of marque?\*

Would it have been possible to continue the fight on the "Loire"? Would not the cost of freight from the States to the French ports have increased tenfold?

"We should not forget that if, in 1871, France was able to resist longer, and save by this delay, if not her territory, at least her honor, it was due to her freedom of action on the side of the sea.

"Having intercourse through her ports with the whole world, she found in the ocean an inexhaustible source of life. In the critical position of a man whose one lung does not work, she still breathed through the other, and lived in this way until the enemy crushed her heart.

"If the Germans had been masters of the sea, France—compressed as in a vice—would have instantly perished from suffocation."†

Our navy was able to render active service in the national defence only from the moment when its men were landed.

\*Armed privateers. It is a fact that Germany had forfeited this right since the "Declaration of Paris" (April 16, 1856) annexed to the Treaty of Paris (March, 1856). Section 1. of this instrument is worded as follows: "Privateering is and shall remain abolished." To this Mexico, Spain, and the United States, as we know, declined their adherence. In his letter of July 28, 1856, Secretary of State Marcy explained the refusal of the United States, stating that the new arrangements would particularly favor those nations which, having both a large maritime traffic and a strong navy, would then be able, in all security, to concentrate their forces for attack, and this without being exposed to any retaliation against their trade—which would be so tempting to the adversary. That is what made Lord Clarendon and Lord Palmerston say at Westminster: "England is the one most benefited by the change."

The cause why England accepted arbitration in the "Alabama claims," and why in the late Venezuelan conflict she retained such a friendly attitude toward the United States, despite the unwelcome messages which came to her from the other side, may largely be found in the fear of a contest with privateers.

Lieutenant Mizon relates that in 1885, at the time of the first French expedition against Madagascar, some Hispano-American adventurers applied to the Court of Emyrne to be granted a certain number of letters of marque in blank. They boasted that they would be able to fit out a few ships, which, under the Hovan flag, would run down the French merchant vessels in the Indian Sea. Among other plans, they proposed to cruise around the outlet of the Red Sea, in the latitude of the Gulf of Aden, and there to stop all troop-ships and steamers of the "Messageries Maritimes Company" bound to or from the Far East. We may fancy the ruin the French traffic would have undergone if we realize that the ships they offered to equip had a speed superior to that of the most rapid French cruiser of the time. And Lieutenant Mizon adds, it happened to be the English government which, with all its might, influenced the Court of Emyrne and dissuaded it from entering on a course which other nations would certainly have imitated.

However, England, while benefiting for the present by the privileged situation she has secured through the "Declaration of 1856," has not overlooked the advantages she could derive from the re-establishment of privateering in case of a contest with certain powers, the maritime trade of which has some importance, say, for example, the United States. This is why in 1876, on the other side of the channel, we were entertained by the strange spectacle of an agitation in favor of restoring the privateers.

I will cite as an example, the pamphlet of Mr. John Paget, a lawyer, entitled "Naval Powers and Their Policy," another by Admiral Hall, "Our National Defences," and I should also mention a lecture by an English officer, Mr. Ross, of Bladenburg, to the Royal United Service Institution. Each of these writings is a plea in favor of the restoration of privateering.

Thus, even in England, the question is not regarded as definitely settled. So much more is it necessary for France if she start to organize her navy in anticipation of a mercantile war, to begin as an initial step to denounce the end of the "Declaration of Paris."

†Admiral Réveillère: Préface to "*Les Guerres Navales de Demain.*"

Then our gallant marines had an opportunity to show their courage, and it is known how they fought near Paris and in the Army of the Loire. However, the utter inadequacy of our battleships is sufficient to illustrate that the hundreds of millions of francs wasted during the Empire, in spite of the precious directions furnished by the Committee of Inquiry of 1849-1851, had resulted in nothing but a magnificent organization of impotency.

At the conclusion of the war of 1870, our navy was, as Mons. Etienne Lamy puts it, "more popular, but more unknown than ever." The navy was, of course, included in the re-organization of our forces, as was planned by the various governments which succeeded each other following the treaty of Frankfort. In a general way, we may say that our land forces and our sea forces were entrusted, except for purely formal control, to the same chiefs who had just shown their complete inability to make use of them. Nevertheless, the Parliament, on several occasions, made some efforts to obtain an account of the true state of our national forces; but their attempts, without system, without "*esprit de suite*," have always clashed with the official optimism, which, under the Republic, as under the Empire, after Sedan as before, affirms imperturbably, to the plaudits of the parliamentary rabble, that everything is the best in an organization whose leaders are entirely satisfied with themselves.

As for the navy, Mons. Etienne Lamy, Secretary of the Committee of the Budget for that department in the year 1879, was one of the first to give the alarm.

"After the war of 1870, the navy was not impoverished. It had, still untouched, a fleet of four hundred ships, estimated at 400,000,000 francs. This naval wealth, far from demanding new sacrifices, seemed too considerable for the new position of France. It was resolved to limit the forces to what would be indispensable.

"In the plans of 1872, this force amounted to 210 vessels, estimated at 400,000,000 francs. To execute this, it seemed that the fleet should merely be decreased, and as was said at the time, a reduced fleet picked out from the old superabundant one.

"Unfortunately, that was a great mistake. In 1873, there were not found over 228 ships, having cost 228,000,000 francs, with which to compose a regular fleet. At the same time, it was figured that the plan of 1873 would cost, in order to be put into effect, over 600,000,000 francs."

This double error, too high an estimation of the existing material, and too low a one of the coming outlay, is a character-

istic of our navy department. Without having lost anything through the war, it did not cease to claim extraordinary supplies to reconstitute its material. The problem was to realize the programme of 1872, a plan sentimental, unelaborated, which it was far from being possible to execute, in spite of the promises given the Parliament which had granted the credits.

Mons. Etienne Lamy tried to state precisely the new ideas, and to outline our naval reforms. He said :

"To have a navy is to have a fleet—that is, to have vessels and marines. What is the number and the strength of these vessels? What are the number and service of the men ?

"Everything is combined in the navy for a decisive action, yet, nevertheless, during half a century such an action has never shown itself. Such persistent shortcoming denotes permanent defects, and incriminates the administration of the department.

"The French navy has retained, in the midst of reforms which took place in all other departments, the same old establishments; and the maintenance of the past, which should have excluded all reasons for extraordinary expenses, is on the contrary the very cause which explains them.

"The normal proportion between the material and the hands with which to man it, does not exist in our navy.

"The French fleet is, of all others, the one most expensive to support. To build a small number of vessels at a time, a few shipyards only suffice; but in order to build them rapidly, these shipyards must have powerful means at their command. In France, the fear of bringing to ruin cities supported only by their military establishments, together with a thousand private interests always ready to work against the general welfare, and even, in some proportion, public interest itself, prevented the closing of any port. . . .

"Thus, since 1870, foreign navies have always produced new samples of battleships in a shorter time than the French navy. As long as progress proceeds so fast and the construction so slowly, parts of the fleet in the shipyard will be worthless before even having touched the water. It may be stated as a general rule that, for identical constructions, the state shipyards spend at least one-third more time and labor than those of private industry. . . .

"Not half of the credits for the department are spent on the navy—that is, on the vessels and those who man them. . . .

"Just as the actual number of marines vanishes when compared to the number of extra employees, the fleet itself is but an annex of the various departments on land.

After having proved the evils and pointed out their cause, Mons. Etienne Lamy tells us of the remedy :

"Public sentiment demands from the best wisdom of the House a navy in which the fleet is the principal object, the staffs reduced in numbers but well compensated, kept in activity by constant labor; the implements on such a scale as to render strong and fast building possible; where nothing is lost in complications, where everything is plain, orderly and powerful."

After this report of Mons. Etienne Lamy, we might have expected that the work of the Dufaure Commission would have been taken up and brought to a fulfilment. But again events were going to disappoint this expectation. Mons. Etienne Lamy was not re-elected, and until 1881 the peace of the palace of the "Rue Royale" remained undisturbed by any adverse reports.

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*(To be continued.)*